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Theme 2

THE THEME AND SUBJECT MATTER IN THE PLASTIC ART OF OUR TIME

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Works of art are produced by artists. If, therefore, we wish to consider the question of theme and subject in the plastic arts of to-day, we may legitimately ask ourselves about the themes and subjects of works by individual leading artists of to-day. We must, of course, always allow for the insoluble mystery as to why one man in millions is born with extraordinary natural gifts as an artist, and the rest not. But that allowance made, it seems to me not so difficult to suggest an answer to the question of theme and subject - more particularly where artists make concessions to naturalistic representation.

Here in Ireland we have a great painter, Mr. Jack B. Yeats. He has been described as "a romantic impressionist." It is a description which, as far as it goes, has validity. But it does not explain why Mr. Yeats should also be one of the greatest colourists in the history of painting. (It might be maintained that this is beside the point we are discussing. I personally do not think it is. For just as the forms and shapes in a work of art are determined by the artist's temperament and theme, so, obviously, are his colour harmonies. Mr. Yeats's radiant colour is as much a part of his theme as Rembrandt's chiaroscuro was of his. Similarly with Matisse. If Matisse is, as I think he is, par excellence the artist of the comedy of the feminine, how should his colour be other than the exquisitely rarefied thing it is both in conception and execution?)

But where the artist concedes little or nothing to naturalistic representation, the art critic may find himself in a dilemma. Unless a satisfactory clue can be found to the abstract artist's themes, his compositions, lines, forms, shapes and colours can only be judged as technical exercises. Chopin's Preludes and Etudes were composed as finger exercises. But Alfred Cortot goes so far as to give not only musical but even literary interpretations of them. He endeavours to provide them with human as well as technical significance. Dare we do as much in relation to Braque, Picasso, Gris, Gleizes, etc. I incline to think that, whether we admit it or not, most of us do. Remembering, always that the great artist's natural gift is a mystery, it is, nevertheless, not unreasonable to relate the theme to which he applies it to his environment. Thus Matisse is firmly in one of the most enduring, as it is one of the most delightful, traditions of French painting. Thus Yeats applies his gifts to the projection, in terms of painting, of the greater glory and beauty of the world he knew and loved best when that world was little known and less loved. But Braque? But Picasso? Dare we relate the thoughtful art of Braque not merely to the passion for analysis that has always been characteristic of Paris, but more especially to the Paris of the time of Bergson? I confess that I do. Dare

we relate the explosive art of Picasso not only to the Paris of Br. but to the troubled Spain in which Picasso grew up and even, perhaps, the fact that translations of Nietzsche were appearing in the Catalonia of his formative years. Again, I, myself, think we may.

What I am trying to suggest is that, in abstract, as in naturalistic, art, there is an element of theme, of subject, which is related to the environment of the particular artist. (What I am, of course, quite sure of, is that unless an artist is in truth an artist, a man with a vision to project, a subject to treat, his employment of the abstract idiom rather than the naturalistic will not hide his deficiencies for very long).

Pessimists complain that God, nature and man himself have now been driven out of art. It is true that the Protestant Reformation drove ecclesiastical art out of the north of Europe. It is also true that the cult of nature, first in seventeenth century Holland, then in eighteenth century England and later in the France of the Impressionists, replaced the preoccupation with religious, philosophical and historical subjects. But even to-day Rouault remains. And it may yet happen that Vuillard and Bonnard, who went on giving the validity of great painting to simple scenes of everyday life when fashion in Paris was running after abstractions, will come to be regarded as the heroic figures of French art in the first half of the twentieth century. After all, how many of the Parisian pundits of the eighteenth century would believe that for us, two hundred years later, Chardin is the greatest painter of his time?

There remains the question whether the abstract subject - its validity accepted - has inspired any of its practitioners to as noble achievement as subjects which lend themselves to naturalistic representation. The interest, the power, the beauty, of much abstract art is not to be denied, whether it be painted pictures in our own day or sculptural or architectural forms of the baroque period in Italy. But then I think of Raphael's cartoon of Saint Peter and Saint John at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, in which the abstract passages, impressive as they are, inevitably take their place as secondary accessories to the serenely beautiful appeal of the subject as expressed through the figures. And I cannot feel sorry that the initiators of abstract art in Ireland, Miss Evie Hone and her friend, the late Mainie Jellett, after they had spent years of puritanical self-discipline as abstract artists, broke away, both of them, from the restrictions of abstract art, and returned to representation, to subject in the traditional sense. *For if I accept - as I do - the principle of abstract art it does not follow that I am read to make a cult or subscribe to a recognition of "fat-books and hangers" or to acquiesce in the the idea of a feckless boycott or even distortion of that human figure which in the words of the Psalmist is "fearfully and wonderfully" made and which has been the perennial inspiration of the greatest art at all periods of history.*